

## **How to have Difficult Conversations with Parents/Carers**



A guide is for practitioners who work with children, young people and their families. The information in this guide is not exhaustive and it should be used as a reference tool alongside practitioners own safeguarding practices and in conjunction with appropriate supervision.

## **Four factors to consider when preparing for a difficult conversation with a parent or carer:**

### **1. Principles** – to support safeguarding discussions with parents/carers:

- **Always take time to plan the conversation before you speak to parents/carers**
- Be open and honest, use basic language, avoid jargon
- Ensure child protection policies are clear include child protection issues in information you give out to parents/carers you are working with
- Explain your statutory duty to safeguard children's welfare, 'duty of care' and requirement to report your concerns
- Ensure parents/carers sign to acknowledge they have read and understood your safeguarding policy and offer them a copy, if appropriate.
- Ensure parents/carers are aware of your injury policy, incident book and that they will need to sign this when entries are made.
- Raise awareness that injuries acquired away from your agency also need to be recorded and signed by parent/carer to confirm they have been given the information
- Use Early Help, refer to children's centre or signpost to other support agencies e.g. Health Visitor, Home Start, parenting courses, interpreters etc.
- Do parents understand consent and what they are agreeing to?

Think about the **strengths** of the family and who else might be able to support them if they are having a difficult time. Doing this helps build relationships and allows a more open conversation.

### **2. Planning**

Take some time to think things through. What are the main points/concerns you really want to make?

**If you feel it's too risky to the child/young person to speak to their parents/carers before speaking to children's services, then don't.** Do not put a child/young person at risk if for example there are the following concerns:

- It is possible the child/young person could be silenced or told what to say to practitioners
- There is suspected sexual abuse
- Parents/carers could destroy evidence or hinder a police investigation



Otherwise it's good practice to discuss concerns with parents/carers and tell them you are going to make a referral. Before your conversation:

- Plan how you are going to broach your concern and how to respond to different responses e.g. anger, denial, emotional breakdown etc.
- Choose a time and place to give full privacy
- Consider the timing of the meeting (e.g. a tired, crying baby etc.) depending on urgency of the concern.
- Adapt your style to the parent/carer consider language barriers or learning difficulties
- Acknowledge your own anxiety about dealing with a difficult situation as it may affect your communication style.

- Have the child/young person's key worker with you or nearby for support and as a witness (and vice versa) or get support from children's services.
- If previous experience of the parent/carer suggests they pose a risk, make a full risk assessment and do not meet them alone. Consider a joint visit with colleague or partner agency. Agree some safe words with your team for your own protection. Use a venue that provides neutral ground and security.
- If you know the parent/carer isn't going to agree with you, prepare for that emotion and response.

### 3. The Conversation

Make sure members of staff know where you are and what you are doing before a meeting. Tips and ideas for having a difficult conversation:

- Consider your position in the room so no one feels trapped
- Ensure children/young people can't overhear you and are occupied (provide toys etc.)
- Frame the concern in a model of help and support
- Be straight forward - tell the parent/carer a referral to children's services is going to be or has been made
- Tell them that 'as a parent/carer they will want to get to the bottom of the matter'
- Give clear explanations
- Always remain confidential and professional
- Words are sometimes really hard to find when approaching a parent/carer - use 'active listening'
- **Do not:** argue, interrupt, give advice, pass judgement, jump to conclusions or let the parent/carer's sentiment affect you
- Avoid excessive reassurance ...it may not be all right
- **Do:** encourage the parent/carer to talk
- Clarify what the parent/carer means
- Summarise what the parent/carer has said
- Consider your communication style: tone, pitch, speed of voice, body language (body slightly to the side, with an open stance or sit); be calm and make eye contact and appreciate that they may need to talk
- Consider the parent/carer's point of view which may be influenced by a bad experience of services, lack of trust, limited or distorted understanding of what is appropriate for children/young people, learning difficulties, cultural and language barrier
- Explain the nature of your concern using tact and diplomacy but be direct and use factual information "Jodie was not brought for the last two appointments, what is the reason for this?"
- **Do not:** use words such as child protection or child abuse, try words such as concerns, welfare and duty of care



#### **Use your eyes and ears more than your mouth.**

Think about the **strengths** of the family and who else might be able to support them if they are having a difficult time. Doing this helps build relationships and allows a more open conversation.

#### 4. Examples

This is not an exhaustive list and you may want to use a technique of your own, following the general principle of open and probing questions:

- avoid using “I think” which indicates it could be own opinion
- avoid using jargon, try:
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**Whenever there is a worry about any child, or they say something about being hurt we legally have to pass on that information to children's services - you may have read this in the parent's information/handbook when Billy started?’**

*Rubina's behaviour has changed dramatically over the past few weeks; she has gone from being a happy, outgoing child to a very quiet, withdrawn child. Have you any idea what could have caused this?’*

‘Peter has been very lethargic today and says he has not slept is there anything going on that might be troubling him?’

‘I need to talk to you about the injury to Jane's face; can you tell me what happened?’

‘William told a member of staff that he is slapped every night, and, because of what he said I have informed children's social care. All settings are expected to talk to social care when children say things like this, and children's social care have asked me to talk to you about this. Can you tell me what happened?’

**Questions can start with the following:**

- **'Is there a reason why.....?'**
- **'We need to have a chat.....'**
- **'Omar has said.....'**
- **'I have noticed John seems hungry in the mornings, is he managing to have breakfast before he comes to school?'**
- **Nathan has a bruise on his face but he can't remember how it happened, do you know how he did it?**

**Next Steps?**

Once you have had a conversation or a series of discussions with the parent/carer, you may need to consider what actions, if any, you need to take.

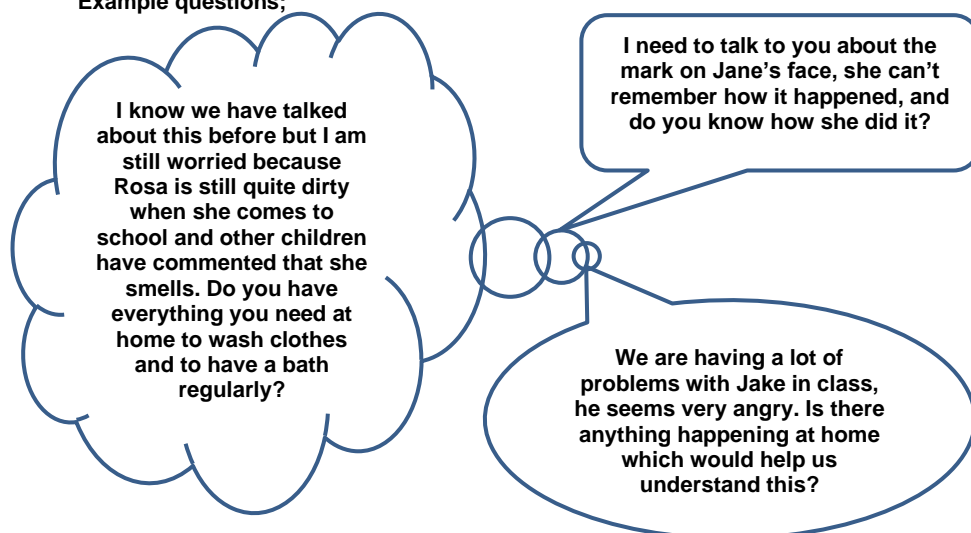
Consider the following:

- Professional curiosity – have you confirmed the response you have received with other agencies?
- Do you need to make further enquiries?
- Trust your instincts – you have spoken to the parent/carer and you know the child/young person trust your instincts if you still have concerns follow safeguarding procedures – ensure you check your agency safeguarding procedures and seek guidance from an appropriate person
- Pre and post-supervision - agencies have varying supervision procedures; be sure to raise your concerns and get guidance & support before and after you have had a conversation with a parent as this will give you chance to reflect on what happened and discuss what needs to happen next (reflective practice)
- Escalation – if you are still concerned about a decision or practice you can escalate your concerns the Pan Bedfordshire LSCB's recommend that all practitioners use the [Escalation Procedures](#)
- Referral – following any discussion if you are concerned about the safety of a child/young person or you believe they are at risk of immediate danger then contact the police. If you believe the child/young person is at risk of significant harm - complete the multiagency request for social work support and seek guidance from the MASH, For more information in regards to [Responding to Abuse and Neglect](#)
- You may want to complete an [Early Help Assessment](#).

Here are some examples of questions for each area which could be used when having difficult conversations;

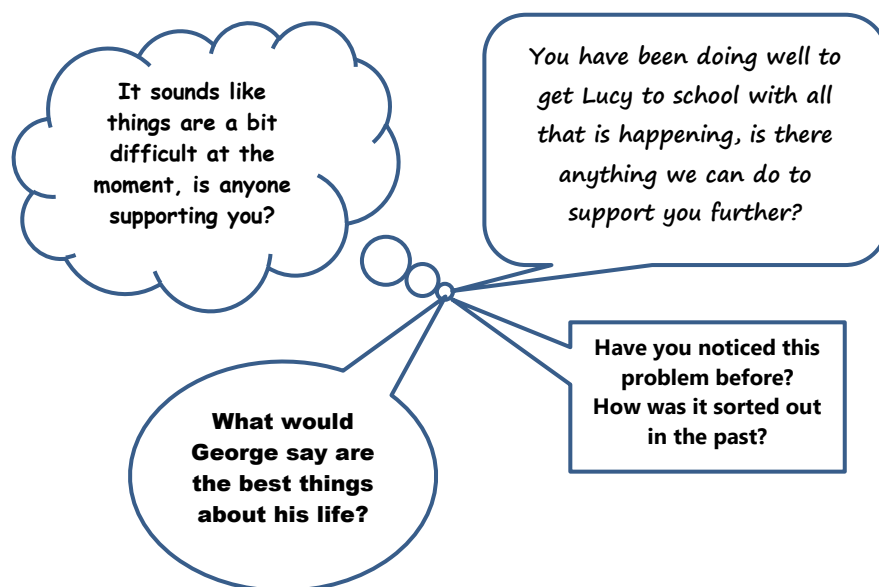
- What are we worried about?
- What words would you use to talk about this problem so that parent/carer understands?
- Use plain language and avoid jargon.
- Consider any problems the family might be having which are making this problem harder to deal with e.g. housing, finances, housing, isolation or family breakdown.

**Example questions;**



**What's working well?**

Who are the people who care for this child/young person and what are the best things about how they care for them?  
Who would the child/young person say are the most important people in their lives? And how do they help them grow up well?



## What needs to happen?

Now you have explored this more,

- How worried are you about this child/young person?  
10 is not worried; 0 is so worried you need to make a referral for support or safeguarding
- What would you need to see for it to be 10?
- What do you think is the next step to getting this worry sorted out?
- Have you done any direct work with the child/young person? For example, used the [Day in My Life tools](#)? Is this more about lived experience or analysis of your work?

### Next steps:

- **Professional Curiosity** - verify any information with practitioners or other family members.
- Supervision – seek guidance before and after interaction with parents/carers to reflect on the information gathered
- Procedures - follow your agency safeguarding procedures
- Referral – if you are concerned about the safety of the child/young person
- [Escalation](#) – if you are not satisfied with the outcome of the referral and still have concerns.

Please access the [Pan Bedfordshire Interagency Child Protection Procedures](#).

**Commented [SS1]:** Need to add links to revised and new documents